The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England

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CHAPTER 11

Smell in the York Corpus Christi Plays[1]

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Introduction

In 2004, Richard Axel and Linda Buck won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their research into the organization of the olfactory system, which revealed that we can each distinguish between about 10,000 different odours. The Swedish Academy praised them for explicating what 'had long remained the most enigmatic of our senses': the sense of smell.[2] The role of smell in the past, however, continues to be enigmatic. While there is now a considerable number of studies on the history of sight, hearing, taste and touch, the history of olfaction has traditionally been neglected.[3] This gap in our knowledge might be attributed to two factors. First, smell has been denigrated as animal-like and primitive by a long line of intellectuals, and hence not considered an object worthy of academic enquiry.[4] Most infamously, perhaps, for Darwin,

1 We would like to thank the members of the Medieval Research Seminar at the Faculty of English, University of Oxford, and the members of the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 "Press Release: 2004 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine", Nobel Assembly of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, October 4, 2004, http://nobelprize.org/medicine/laureates/2004/press.html (consulted 5 February 2014). See further Dugan H., *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: 2011) 1.

3 The 1980s are generally seen as a watershed moment for smell studies across the disciplines of history, the social sciences, and literary and cultural studies. Foundational texts included Alain Corbin's *Le Miasme et la jonquille* (1982; publication in English in 1986: *The Foul and the Fragrant*), which highlighted the significance of odour and its various associations in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, and Patrick Süskind's bestseller *Das Parfum. Geschichte eines Mörders* (1985; publication in English in 1986: *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*), which was influenced by Corbin's book. See further Drobnick J., "Introduction: Olfactocentrism", in Drobnick J. (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader* (Oxford – New York: 2006) 1–9, 3–4.

4 See further Classen C. – Howes D. – Synnott A., *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London etc., Routledge: 1994; reprint, London – New York: 2005) 3–5; Jenner M.S.R., "Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories", AHR Forum, *American Historical Review* (2011) 335–351, 337–343; Guérer A. le, "Olfaction and Cognition: A Philosophical and Psychoanalytical View",

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the sense of smell was a 'rudimentary condition' inherited from 'some early progenitor' that was thus 'much more highly developed' in the 'dark coloured races of man' than in 'the white and civilised races'.[5] Second, cultural historians appear to have neglected the study of olfaction owing to a belief that smell is too ephemeral to be historicized. After all, the smells of the past have evaporated; as Classen, Howes and Synnott put it: 'We do not know what the past smelled like,' because 'smells cannot be preserved'.[6]

In an attempt to recapture these lost smells, a growing number of museums and publishers simulate the odours of the past and then release them in the form of scent trails, scratch-and-sniff panels and scent boxes to an audience eager to experience the stench of World War I trenches, the reek of Victorian sewers or the tang of medieval dung-heaps. Producing a combination of distinctive smells labelled 'fish market,' 'burned wood,' 'rubbish acrid' and others, in 1984 the Jorvik Viking Centre pioneered the use of scents to enhance visitors' experience of the past as they travel aboard a time capsule through Viking York.[7] Similarly, Canterbury's visitor attraction, The Canterbury Tales, promises its visitors that they will experience not only the sights and sounds but also the 'smells of a bygone era'.[8] Such popularizing attempts to recover the smells of the past have been endorsed by a number of historians. Most notably, in his award-winning study, *Sensory Worlds of Early America* (2003), Peter Charles Hoffer has urged scholars to leave their desks and 'to follow children and their parents' to the scent trails and other sensory reproductions in living museums, which, he says, 'approximate the immediate sensory experiences of people' in the past.[9] These reconstructive efforts can only ever afford us a partial appreciation of the role of sense perception in past cultures, however. As the sensory historian Mark Smith has emphasized, it is also important to consider the extent to which sense experiences are subject to historical and cultural contingencies that can only ever be partially recovered, even within

in Rouby C. et al. (eds.), *Olfaction, Taste, and Cognition* (Cambridge: 2002) 3–15; Shiner L. – Kriskovets Y., "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, 3 (2007) 273–286, 275–277.

5 Darwin C., *The Works of Charles Darwin*, ed. P.H. Barrett – R.B. Freeman (London: 1989) vol. 21: *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, part 1, 21–22.

6 Classen – Howes – Synnott, *Aroma* 204.

7 See http://jorvik-viking-centre.co.uk/about-jorvik. On the use of scent at the Jorvik Centre see Aggleton J. – Waskett L., "The Ability of Odours to Serve as State-Dependent Cues for Real-World Memories: Can Viking Smells Aid the Recall of Viking Experiences?", *British Journal of Psychology* 90 (1999) 1–7, 3.

8 See http://www.canterburytales.org.uk.

9 Hoffer P.C., *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: 2003) 2.

controlled museum contexts.[10] While it may be possible to produce the stench of a medieval dung-heap, it is impossible for us to consume that smell in the same way as those who smelled the dung in, say, fifteenth-century York.

Fortunately, the chemical reproduction of historical smells is not the only means we have of gauging their significance: archaeologists point to material traces of olfactory experiences that have survived the ravages of time, such as the remnants of burnt sacrifices, incense holders or portable containers for fragrant oils or holy waters such as ampullae and unguentaria,[11] and Mark Smith and others have reminded us of the abundance of olfactory evidence 'embedded in any number of texts'.[12] Scholars such as David Howes and C.M. Woolgar express unease concerning the use of this evidence, lamenting that 'we must make do with descriptions and recollections'[13] or commenting that our understanding is 'constrained' by our dependence on 'written descriptions for our information about the sense [of smell] and its operation'.[14] Rather than regretting the reliance on written evidence to which any discussion of the history of olfaction must be subject, we endorse the approach pursued by Holly Dugan, who finds in these texts an opportunity to access how people in the past 'produced, consumed and represented scents'.[15] As Dugan puts it in her study of perfume in early modern England, the language of olfaction makes invisible smells appear and functions as 'a historical archive of sensation'.[16] Sense historians have only recently begun to engage this archive.

The medieval drama is a synaesthetic artwork that offers its audiences a variety of sensory experiences and thus constitutes a rich source for historians

10 Smith M.M., "Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History", *Journal of Social History* 40, 4 (2007) 841–858, 844–846.

11 See Hamilakis Y., *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect* (New York: 2013) 214–217; Brazinski P.A. – Fryxell A.R.P., "The Smell of Relics: Authenticating Saintly Bones and the Role of Scent in the Sensory Experience of Medieval Christian Veneration", *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 23, 1 (2013) 1–15. Ampullae were 'used by pilgrims to carry home drops of oil from the lamps in the holiest places of the shrine.' Bagnall R. – Rathbone D., *Egypt from Alexander to the Early Christians* (Los Angeles: 2004) 119. Unguentaria are 'narrow-necked flasks to contain perfumed oils or unguents', which were 'frequently deposited in burials, presumably to create sweet smells'. Hayes J.W., *Handbook of Mediterranean Roman Pottery* (London: 1997) 85.

12 Smith M.M., *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: 2008) 5.

13 Classen – Howes – Synnott, *Aroma* 3.

14 Woolgar C.M., *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: 2006) 117.

15 Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume* 11.

16 Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume* 5.

of perception. It has frequently been argued that, in order to understand medieval drama as theatre, all elements of the theatrical experience must be considered, but research to date has largely concentrated on the senses of sight and hearing.[17] The usefulness of a study considering the medieval drama's olfactory appeal is pointed to in the words of a well-known early fifteenth-century sermon, the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. Towards the beginning of this antitheatrical tract, we read that 'miraclis pleyinge reversith [contradicts] Crist' for two related reasons:

> Firste in taking to pley that that he toke into most ernest. The secound in taking to miraclis of oure fleyss, of oure lustis, and of oure five wittis that that God tooc to the bringing in of his bitter deth and to teching of penaunse doinge, and to fleyinge of feding of oure wittis and to mortifying of hem.[18]

The syntax of this passage is rather difficult, but it would seem that what the anonymous author of *Miraclis Pleyinge* is trying to say here is that when we mobilize our flesh, our lusts and our five senses in our attendance at dramatic performances, we disrespect Christ's Incarnation. God took the five senses with which we are also endowed and suffered through them, and he did this in order to teach us to starve and to mortify those same senses: we ought not to excite and to feed them through artificial means, especially not during a purportedly devotional activity.

Undoubtedly, this author's understanding of the 'wittys' or senses as gateways to sin reflects a long tradition of viewing our sensory organs as portals via which we might be penetrated by temptation, a tradition which is further discussed in Sean Otto's and Richard Newhauser's contributions to this volume.[19] What interests us here is the emphasis the author of the *Tretise* places on the plurality of the sensual experiences supported by late medieval drama. Since he laments that *miraclis* abuse all five of our senses – 'oure five wittis that God tooc' – it is clear that his criticism extends beyond the visual and auditory stimulation offered by the entertainments that he condemns.[20] It

17 See for example King P., "Seeing and Hearing; Looking and Listening", *Early Theatre* 3 (2000) 155–166, 155.

18 *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, ed. C. Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: 2011) lines 57–62.

19 See too Ashbrook Harvey S., *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: 2006) 160–162.

20 The precise meaning of the *miraclis* referred to in this treatise has proven difficult to determine. We subscribe to Davidson's opinion that the term as used in this text 'appears

seems fair to conclude, then, that those entertainments must have developed a significant pan-sensory appeal. This should come as little surprise, at least so far as medieval drama's use of smell is concerned, since preliminary historical research suggests that the olfactory neutrality of much twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatre may represent an aberration in the chronology of performance, not the norm.[21]

With a view to recovering some part of the plenitude of the sensory experience supported by late medieval drama, we have set out to reconstruct the smellscape of the York Corpus Christi Cycle. Our attempts to rediscover the uses and meanings of smell on the late medieval stage thus start with the biggest, the best-known, and the most extravagant of the extant cycle plays. At first glance, admittedly, this may not appear to be a particularly promising line of enquiry. A search through Kinneavy's *Concordance to the York Plays* for various forms and spellings of the words 'smell,' 'nose' and 'stench' returns no hits.[22] But all this really tells us is that these are not words that found their way into the mouths of actors on the pageant wagons at York. We think it would be a mistake to assume that the sense of smell was not engaged in performances of the cycle just because olfactory perception is not discussed *per se* by its performers. Indeed, it seems rather unlikely that the York play assumed a low olfactory profile when we consider the technical virtuosity employed in order to enhance the visual and auditory experience of the drama.[23]

[...] to cover a very wide range of vernacular drama of a religious nature, especially plays on the Passion and on the lives and martyrdoms of the saints but also including non-sacred plays and summer games presented on religious festivals and Sundays' (*A Treatise* 120).

21 Sally Banes attributes the rise of a scentless theatre in the twentieth century to the conventions of fourth-wall theatre which 'generally divided the spectator from the mainstream stage and permitted only sight and sound to cross its divide' (29). See Banes S., "Olfactory Performances", in Banes S. – Lepecki A. (eds.), *The Senses in Performance* (London: 2007) 29–37. Farah Karim-Cooper's discussion in this volume highlights the pan-sensory appeal of early theatre; the theatre in Shakespeare's time, she writes, was 'a wild and complex sensorium'. On the early modern theatrical uses and meanings of incense in particular, see too Pickett H.C., "The Idolatrous Nose: Incense on the Early Modern Stage", in Degenhardt J.H. – Williamson E. (eds.), *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage* (Farnham: 2011) 19–37.

22 Kinneavy G.B., *A Concordance to the York Plays* (New York – London: 1986). The word 'scent' in its various spellings occurs only as the past participle of the verb 'send.'

23 This virtuosity has been highlighted in a range of recent performance-based studies, from among which we might cite the discussion of Moses's magic wand in the York Hosiers' Pharaoh and Moses (Play 11), in Butterworth P., *Magic on the Early English Stage* (Cambridge: 2005) 177–178; the account of the machinery needed to elevate the cross in the Pinners' Crucifixio Christi (Play 35), in Aronson-Lehavi S., "Raising the Cross:

Central to our argument is the conviction that the York play-text can reveal most about the performance life of the Corpus Christi cycle when it is set alongside a variety of parallel sources of evidence, including contemporaneous ideas about sense perception, records of analogous drama, the visual arts, and historical and archaeological studies of the city of York. We thus propose to collate and to contextualize a series of references to smells and their production that are scattered throughout the York play-text. By so proceeding, we hope to elucidate some of the ways in which these references might have signified for their audiences and perhaps have been carried over in performance. This is what it means for us to engage Dugan's 'historical archive of sensation'. Our method is comparative and speculatory, and we have attempted at all times to keep a directorial eye – or, rather, nose – trained on the play-text's realizable potential. We begin with a consideration of the ways in which the York Play deploys unpleasant smells in order to underline a range of theological, devotional and comic points. Here we feel we are on the safest ground: the York play-text provides clear evidence of an interest in the stench of sin and its artificial reproduction. What is more, historical, archaeological and pathoecological studies on York suggest ways in which the particular economy and geography of the town lent itself to an especially fragrant exploration of these topics. On the subject of the cycle's deployment of pleasant smells it must be admitted that the textual evidence we have to work with in the York play-text is less rich and more broadly scattered, but we hope that a comparative approach to these briefer references will begin to suggest ways in which they might have engaged medieval audiences, actors and directors.

Unpleasant Smells: Smoke and Filth

Middle English includes a large vocabulary for describing unpleasant smells. Many of these words carry both literal and figural valences: the meanings of the adjective 'foul' for example comprised 'dirty', 'rotten' and 'stinking' as well as 'evil' and 'sinful', and the noun 'filth' was used for both putrid matter and matter conducive to moral corruption (MED, 'foul', 1a, 1b, 3; 'filth', 1, 3). The fifteenth-century sermon cycle *Jacob's Well* compares the moral corruption of the body by sin to the rotting of an apple, whereby something sweet-smelling and virtuous is turned into something stinking in the sight of God: 'Also as rotyn-

Pre-Textual Theatricality and the York Crucifixion Play", in Rogerson M. (ed.), *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City* (Woodbridge: 2011) 165–179; and the magisterial account of the music written to accompany York's individual pageants in Rastall R., *Music in Early English Religious Drama*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: 1996–2001).

hed doth awey þe swete smel & þe good odour of an appyll so dooth synne awey the smel of swetnesse of vertuys out of þi lyif and makyth þi lyvyng to stynke in þe sy3t of God'.[24] As the ultimate sinner, the Devil was understood to be foul-smelling, reeking of excrement and sulphur, and written and pictorial accounts of hell foregrounded the olfactory quality of the place. Dante's *Inferno* (Book XI) first springs to mind,[25] but there are countless other descriptions: Thomas Aquinas speaks of the 'reeky' fires of hell,[26] as does Hildegard of Bingen, who describes hell as a 'long and wide marsh [...] emitting the worst stink'.[27] The 'stynkynge stynk' of hell (CT X.209) is also included in the list of infernal torments with which Chaucer's Parson brings home the 'terror of what will be the sensory experiences of sinners for an eternity of hell', as Richard Newhauser puts it elsewhere in this volume.[28] Others take up the topographical feature added to Purgatory by Gregory the Great of a bridge across a stinking river which carries sinners to hell.[29] For instance, Robert Brunne's confessional manual *Handlyng Synne* recounts a vision of the final judgement, replete with 'stynkynnge' water from the river carrying the sinful down into the abyss.[30] Finally, in a fifteenth-century stained-glass window from a parish church in East Sussex, the olfactory assault suffered by sinners in hell is suggested by the figure in the foreground who is holding his nose [Fig. 11.1].[31]

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24 Cited in Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* 124. Further examples of the association of bad odour with sin are listed in Classen C., *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: 2005) 47–50.

25 See especially the first lines of Canto XI, where Dante speaks of the 'horrible stench' ('l'orribile soperchio', line 4) coming out of the abyss: Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans., with a commentary, by C.S. Singleton, Bollingen Series LXXX (Princeton: 1970) vol. 1: Italian text and translation, 108–109.

26 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, "Treatise on the Last Things", Question 97, Art. 4: *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. by D.J. Sullivan (Chicago – London – Toronto: 1952) vol. 2, 1068.

27 Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of the Rewards of Life*, trans. B. Hozeski (New York: 1994) 157. Further examples of hell as a foul-smelling place are given in Classen C., "The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent", in Drobnick J. (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader* (Oxford – New York: 2006) 375–390, 382–384.

28 The citation from Chaucer is taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale", *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: 1987).

29 Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. O.J. Zimmerman, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 39 (Washington, D.C.: 1959; reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: 1995) 239.

30 Mannyng Robert, *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS (London: 1901) 50–51, lines 1387 and 1419–1422.

31 On the foul odours associated with hell, see further Seiler T.H., "Filth and Stench as Aspects of the Iconography of Hell", in Davidson C. – Seiler T.H. (eds.), *The Iconography of Hell* (Kalamazoo, MI: 1992) 132–140.

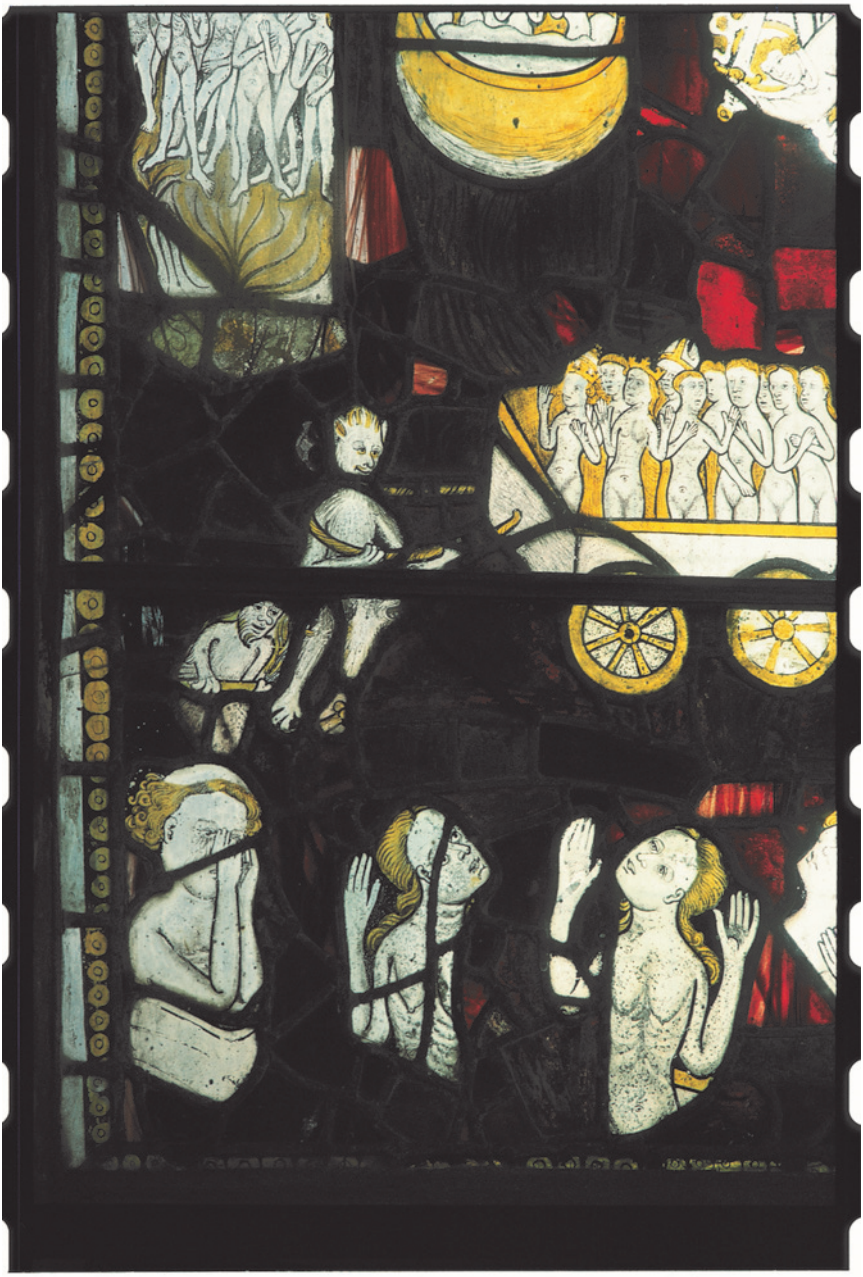

FIGURE 11.1 *Detail from the Doom Window, St Mary the Virgin, Ticehurst, East Sussex. 15th century.*
PHOTO © PAINTON COWEN FROM *ENGLISH STAINED GLASS*, THAMES & HUDSON LTD., LONDON

In a number of medieval cycle plays, the putrid stench of the devil and hell is evoked by references to the devil's chronic flatulence.[32] In the N-Town play, the devil lets off a fart directly after his fall from heaven:

> LUCIFERE: Now to helle the way I take,
> In endeles peyn ther to be pyht [set].
> For fere of fyre a fart I crake
> In helle donjoon, myn dene is dyth [prepared]![33]

More devilish farts follow. After he is punished for bringing about the Fall of Adam and Eve and has crept home to his 'stynkyng stalle', he breaks his breeches with a fart:

> DIABOLUS: I krepe hom to my stynkyng stalle.
> Helle pyt and hevyn halle
> Shul do thi byddyng bone.
> I falle down here a fowle freke.
> For this falle I gynne to qweke –
> With a fart my brech I breke –
> My sorwe comyth ful sone.[34]

Then, after he fails to tempt Jesus in the desert, he once more 'lete[s] a crakke'.[35] It has been suggested that, here and elsewhere, elaborate stage devices were employed in order to produce these devilish farts. For instance, the plan preceding the play-text of the *Castle of Perseverance* asks the actor playing the devil to 'have gunnepowdyr brennynge in pypys in hys handys and in hys eyrs and in hys ars'.[36]

A key component of the medieval understanding of hell was, then, that it was a foul-smelling place characterized by choking fires and filth. In view of this long tradition of associating hell and the devil with filth and choking stench it is not surprising that bad smells are produced or alluded to in pageants at York that feature the devil. In the Creation of the Angels and the Fall of Lucifer (Play 1), the angels-turned-devils complain of the great heat in their

32 Richard Newhauser discusses the significance of the fart in the "Summoner's Tale" in his contribution to this volume.

33 *N-Town Play* 1, lines 79–82. Here and elsewhere, we cite by play and line number from *The N-Town Plays*, ed. D. Sugano (Kalamazoo, MI: 2007).

34 *N-Town Play* 2, lines 268–274.

35 *N-Town Play* 23, line 195.

36 *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed. D.N. Klausner (Kalamazoo, MI: 2010) 9.

new dwelling-place and of being smothered in smoke.[37] In this play as well as in the Harrowing of Hell and Doomsday Plays (Plays 37 and 47), the smoke of hell would almost certainly have been provided by some kind of onstage fire at a hell mouth, that is, at a structure, probably onstage, designed to represent the gates of hell.[38] References to such a structure are to be found in documents detailing performance practice at York and at Coventry.[39] In the case of Coventry, moreover, records of payment referring to the keeping of a fire at hell mouth have survived, detailing payment for the 'kepyng of hell mowthe & the fyer'.[40] Such stage fires might produce not only light, heat, and smoke, but also pungent smells, particularly if pitch or sulphur were burned. The smoke from sulphur fires enveloped actors and audiences in a smell traditionally associated with the devil and hell and thus offered a multisensory experience that assailed not only eyes and ears but also noses.

Another way to generate noxious smoke was to burn bad wheat. One such smelly fire would appear directly to have been called for at York in the Cain and Abel Play (Play 7) when Cain makes his offering of poor grain. The York play-text is unfortunately defective at this moment: the preparation of the wheat fire is recorded but the leaves containing the actual burning have become detached from the codex containing the play-text. It seems safe to assume that Cain's fire was reproduced on stage, however, since God's rejection of Cain's gift is a fundamental element in the story narrated in the pageant. By comparison, in the raucous Towneley Murder of Abel (Play 2) an olfactory confirmation of the insufficiency of Cain's gift is set centre stage in lines that describe, first, the difficulties Cain has setting his offering ablaze, and, second, the terrible smell produced by his burning wheat:

> We! out, haro! help to blaw!
> It will not bren for me, I traw.
> Puf! this smoke dos me mych shame –

37 *York Play* 1, lines 97 and 117. We cite the York play-text by play and line number from *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. C. Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: 2011).

38 See discussions in Sheingorn P., "Who Can Open the Doors of His Face? The Iconography of Hell Mouth" and Meredith P., "The Iconography of Hell in the English Cycles: A Practical Perspective", in Davidson – Seiler, *The Iconography of Hell* 1–19 and 158–186.

39 See *Coventry: Records of Early English Drama*, ed. R.W. Ingram (Toronto: 1981) for example 167, 242, 245, 256, 469, 472 and *York: Records of Early English Drama*, ed. A.F. Johnston – M. Rogerson, 2 vols. (Toronto: 1979) vol. 1, 55, 242. These and similar references are discussed in Butterworth P., "Hellfire: Flame as Special Effect", in Davidson – Seiler, *The Iconography of Hell* 67–101.

40 Ingram, *Coventry* 221.

> Now bren in the dwillys name!
> A! What dwill of hell is it?
> Almost had myne breth beyn dit;
> Had I blawen oone blast more,
> I had beyn choked right thore.
> It stank like the dwill in hell,
> That longer ther myght I not dwell.[41]

Onstage fires were not the only means of bringing forth the stench of sin and the stifling fires of hell. In the York drama, the audience's attention is repeatedly drawn to the filthiness of the Play's devils. In the Creation of the Angels and the Fall of Lucifer, one of the unfallen angels praises God for letting them dwell in a place 'ther never felyng of fylth may full us nor fade us';[42] God subsequently juxtaposes the undefiled angels with those who have fallen 'into fylthe that evermore sall fade tham'.[43] One of the devils goes on to complain that they will have nothing to feed on but 'filth we fynde us beforn'.[44] In the York Harrowing of Hell (Play 37), the insistence on the filthiness of hell makes a further appearance in the words of King David, who speaks of hell as a place that is 'full of filthe'.[45]

The association of hell with filth was probably underlined in the Creation of the Angels and the Fall of Lucifer by the stage presence of its traditional producing guild, the tanners. The tanners prepared animal hides for manufacture into leather goods, and they were most likely not given this pageant coincidentally, both in York and in other places such as Chester, where it was also the tanners who were responsible for staging the Fall of Lucifer (Chester Play 1).[46] As Alan D. Justice points out, these leatherworkers would have been particularly well-placed to enhance the olfactory aspect of their pageant:

> The equipment used in the tanning process included large pits in which raw hides were put to soak in noxious, caustic solutions. In the pageant, when Lucifer falls from heaven, he tumbles into a pit of filth, the nature

41 *Towneley Play* 2, lines 277–286. We cite this play-text by play and line number from *The Towneley Plays*, ed. M. Stevens – A.C. Cawley, 2 vols. (Oxford: 1994).

42 *York Play* 1, line 60.

43 *York Play* 1, line 132.

44 *York Play* 1, line 106.

45 *York Play* 37, line 380.

46 See *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R.M. Luminansky – D. Mills (Oxford: 1974). Subsequent citations of the Chester plays are given from this edition by play and line number.

> of which may be surmised: dung [and, as other authors have added, urine and fermented rye or barley[47]] was sometimes used as an ingredient in the tanning process. An analogy between the tanner's pit and the pit of hell is not difficult to make.[48]

The association of the tanners with stench and pollution would not have been lost on a medieval audience who, we know, frequently complained about the stench and pollution generated by the tanning process, which was for this reason eventually restricted to the fringes of towns.[49] Whether the tanners in their staging of the Fall of the Angels made use of some of their evil-smelling concoctions to generate the smell of hell, whether they counted on the odours clinging to their bodies as a corollary of their craft to do so, or whether they simply relied on the power of association to conjure up an imaginary stench must remain conjectural.

The producers of the York Play could have exploited not only the particularities of the local labour force but also of the geography of the town itself. From archaeological evidence and pathoecological research,[50] we know that several sites of extreme pollution and stench were located in York, a city that proved stubbornly immune to efforts to clean and sanitize it and that remained renowned for its pervasive smells throughout the period during which the Corpus Christi Plays were performed. After visiting York in 1332, Edward III wrote of 'the abominable smell abounding in the said city more than in any other city of the realm from dung and manure and other filth and dirt wherewith the streets and lanes are filled and obstructed' and ordered the streets 'to be cleansed from such filth [...] and to be kept clean',[51] but the city council's continuous efforts to improve York's environmental conditions – recorded for the period between the eleventh and the sixteenth century – suggest that these were still considered unacceptable well into the later Middle Ages.[52] What had changed by the fifteenth century was that waste disposal was assigned to a

47 Armor N.R., *Late Medieval Ipswich: Trade and Industry* (Woodbridge: 2011) 108–109; King G. – Henderson C., "Living Cheek by Jowl: The Pathoecology of Medieval York", *Quaternary International* 30 (2013) 1–12, 3.

48 Justice A.D., "Trade Symbolism in the York Cycle", *Theatre Journal* 31, 1 (1979) 47–58, 56.

49 See e.g. Kowaleski M., *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval England* (Cambridge: 1995) 161 and Armor, *Late Medieval Ipswich* 108–109.

50 'Pathoecology,' as King and Henderson define it, 'is the study of the intersection of the abiotic, biotic and cultural environments of disease': King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 2.

51 Cited King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 2–3.

52 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 1.

number of locations, where dung carts placed in every ward were to off-load their waste.[53] Several of these smelly disposal sites at York coincided with locations at which the play was performed along the route followed by the pageant wagons. One of the first stations at which the wagons stopped was at Ousegate, where public latrines financed by the council in 1367 were situated.[54] Other sites of possible stench were the first two stops on Micklegate, west of which was Tanner Row. Here the medieval tan pits situated behind the houses would have given off their distinctive smell.[55] The stop on Pavement would have been another smelly station, with Hungate to the east, where a waste disposal area was situated, and with St Saviourgate to the north-east, which housed pits containing animal and human faeces.[56] Finally, a putrid smell was also generated by the burning of coal (in particular sea coal), which resulted in the release of sulphur oxide.[57] Harmful concentrations of this gas have been estimated for fourteenth- to seventeenth-century York,[58] from which we can surmise that the city's odour was indeed infernally noxious. Clearly, the frequent evocation of the filth in which the York Play's various devils dwell were apt to assume a new charge when performed in the midst of just such foul smelling vapours and materials, which must have presented themselves as an obvious point of reference – or even as a prop – for actors gesturing on stage.

Contemporary visual art gives a sense of the forms these gestures took.[59] In the stained-glass window referred to above, which depicts the torments of hell [Fig. 11.1], the presence of tormenting odours is evoked by one of the naked souls holding his nose. This gesture is also part of the conventional iconography of the Raising of Lazarus [Fig. 11.2]. Martha's concern about the stench of decay emitting from the body of Lazarus is suggested by her response to Jesus'

53 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 5.

54 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 5.

55 Until the fifteenth century, the tanners had their residence on Tanner Row: Hargrove W., *History and Description of the Ancient City of York*, 2 vols. (York, Herald-Office: 1818; reprint, London: 2013) vol. 2: *The Strangers' Guide* 181.

56 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 5.

57 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 3; Jacobson M.Z., *Atmospheric Pollution: History, Science, and Regulation* (Cambridge: 2002) 82. Sea coal, which was first introduced to London in 1228 (Jacobson, *Atmospheric Pollution* 82) was burned in York from at least 1371 and until at least the late sixteenth century: King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 3.

58 King – Henderson, "Living Cheek by Jowl" 4.

59 On the interrelation between medieval drama and the visual arts more generally, see for example Stevens M., "The Intertextuality of Late Medieval Art and Drama", *New Literary History* 22, 3 (1991) 317–337; Sheingorn P., "On Using Medieval Art in the Study of Medieval Drama", *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 22 (1979) 101–109.

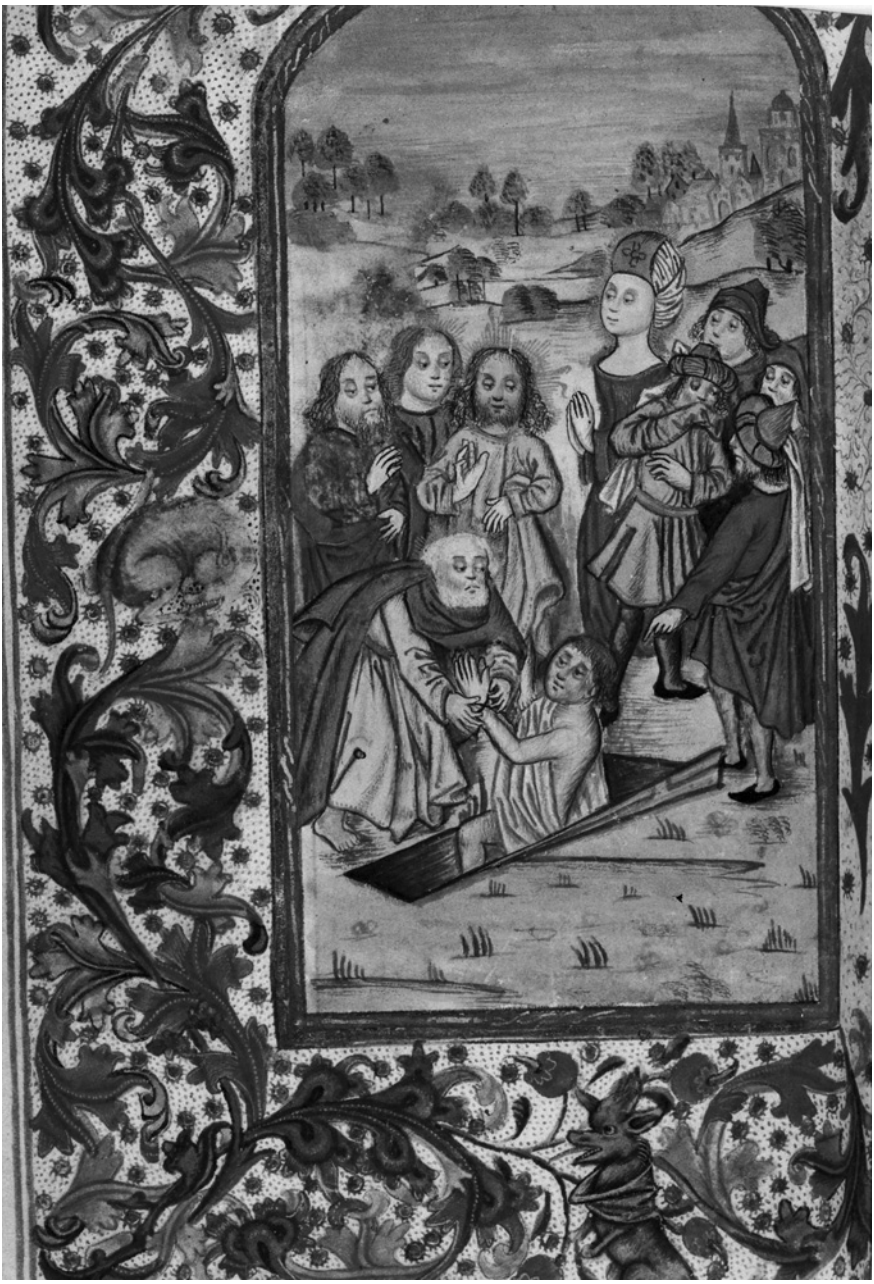

FIGURE 11.2 *The Raising of Lazarus. Book of Hours, Dutch, 15th century. The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS Buchanan 1, fol. 130v.*
IMAGE © BODLEIAN LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

request to take away the stone from Lazarus's tomb four days after his burial: 'Lord, he stynkith now' (John 11:39).[60] This concern was further embellished in liturgical drama:

> You will not be able to bear
> The stench of the dead man;
> For truly, stinking oppressively,
> He has been dead four days.[61]

Remarks expressing anxieties about the stench of Lazarus were often doubled in medieval visual art by a group of bystanders at the tomb who covered their noses in anticipation of the stench emanating from the dead body. In the Chester Lazarus Play, for example, they might have accompanied Martha's warning 'now he stinketh'.[62] Such a gesture was also available to actors wishing to underline the expectation of stench at this moment in the biblical narrative or elsewhere, perhaps too, as in the Lazarus episode, where such a foul smell was finally – miraculously – not produced.

Pleasant Smells: Spices, Flowers and Incense

While the devil was said to emit a foul stench, the bodies of saints were believed to give off a pleasant fragrance, known as the odour of sanctity.[63] Sometimes further described as sweet, flower- or honey-like, this fragrance was thought since late antiquity to accompany miracles, the opening of a tomb of a saint, and the death of saintly individuals, especially martyrs.[64] A pleasant smell also became a means of confirming the authenticity of saintly relics.[65] Indeed,

60 Here and elsewhere we cite the Bible in the Wycliffite version edited by Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books*, 4 vols. (Oxford: 1850).

61 Hilarius, "The Rising of Lazarus (Suscitatio Lazari)", in *Medieval Drama*, ed. D. Bevington (Boston etc.: 1975) 162 and 163, lines 185–188. Cf. Pseudo-Macarios: 'For Lazarus alone, whom the Lord raised up, exuded so fetid an odor that no one could approach his tomb' (cited in Ashbrook Harvey S., "On Holy Stench: When the Odor of Sanctity Sickens", *Studia Patristica XIII: International Conference on Patristic Studies* 35 [2001] 90–101).

62 *Chester Play* 13, line 415.

63 See further Classen, "The Breath of God" 375–382.

64 Atchley E.G.C.F., *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship* (London et al: Longmans, Green 1909) 108.

65 Brazinski – Fryxell, "The Smell of Relics" 12.

according to Judeao-Christian tradition, Divinity itself was sweetly redolent. Wisdom's words in Ecclesiasticus 24:20–21 were often cited, where Wisdom describes how she came forth from the mouth of the Mighty One and took her place among his people, breathing out an aromatic scent:

> As canel and balsam smellende, I 3af smel; and as chose myrre I 3af swotnesse of smel. And as torax, and galban, and vngula, and gutta, and as Liban not kut, I smekede my dwelling; and as balsame not mengd is my smel.

From the earliest periods of Christianity, aromatic scents emitting from flowers, herbs, and, above all, incense, were employed in the church liturgy. Departing from the traditions of ancient Judaism, particularly the instructions in Exodus 30 for building an incense altar, incense was deployed by Christians as early as the fourth century; it was in widespread use by the tenth century. Its meanings and employment are varied and have been outlined most extensively by Edward Atchley.[66] Incense was equated with prayer, travelling heavenward, and being pleasing to God; 'Be forth ri3t reulid myn orisoun as encens in thi si3t' runs the second verse of Psalm 140. In the early fifteenth-century anonymous treatise *Dives and Pauper*, Pauper, a poor itinerant preacher, explains to his interlocutor, the aristocratic Dives, that incense *is* prayer:

> For be þe censer is vnderstondyn mannys herte; be þe cens, holy preyere; be þe feir, charite. [...] [A]s þe encens be hete of þe feir smelly3t swete and steyith vp to heueneward so shuldyn þey lyftyn vp here hertys wyt deuocioun and makyn here prey3erys in charite þat þey myyghtyn been plesaunt to God and wenyn vp to God.[67]

Moreover, incense was associated with holy places and it was burned to demarcate and purify sacred spaces.[68] Thus Thomas Aquinas writes that the reason for employing incense at Holy Communion was 'out of reverence for this sacrament [The Holy Eucharist], in order that any disagreeable smell (arising from the number of persons gathered together) in the building, that could

66 Atchley, *A History of the Use of Incense*.

67 *Dives and Pauper*, ed. P.H. Barnum, EETS (London – New York – Toronto: 1976) vol. 1, 111–112.

68 Spicer A. – Hamilton S., "Defining the Holy: The Delineation of Sacred Space", in Spicer A. – Hamilton S. (eds.), *Defining the Holy Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: 2006) 1–23, 7.

cause annoyance, might be dispelled by its fragrancy'.[69] Likewise, we read in the *Golden Legend* that incense was thought to have been used to purify the air in the stable at the Nativity;[70] according to the Augustinian canon John Mirk, this is how Joseph used the gift of incense, namely 'to put away the stench of the stabull ther [Mary] lay'.[71] This is the use attributed to incense in the Chester Play of the Magi's Gifts (Chester Play 9):

> SECUNDUS REX: And I will offer through Godes grace
> incense that noble savoure hasse.
> Stynke of the stable yt shall wast [overcome],
> theras they be lent.[72]

Finally, a thirteenth-century stained-glass window at St Oswald's church in Ashborne, Derbyshire, indicates that the thurible used to dispense incense could form an integral part of the iconography of the Adoration of the Magi [Fig. 11.3].

In the York, Chester, Towneley and N-Town play cycles, aromatic smells are referred to as the product of herbs, spices, flowers, manna and incense. The Creation plays typically conjure up a rich smellscape. In the N-Town Creation of the World (Play 2), God stresses the olfactory appeal of Paradise, which, he says contains '[b]othe erbe and floure of suete smellyng'[73] and sweet smelling spices: 'Here is pepyr, pyan [peony], and swete lycorys'.[74] The flowers referred to in these citations might have been scattered about out on stage. We know from a stage direction for a Paradise play performed at Angers in 1456 that directors ordered the use of roses and other flowers that had been 'f[r]ais couppés' [freshly cut] on the day of the play's production; they were moreover to be put on stage in vessels filled with water in order to keep them as fresh as possible.[75]

69 *Summa Theologiae* 3a, 83, 5. We quote the English translation provided by Atchley, *The Use of Incense* 204.

70 *Gilte Legende*, ed. R. Hamer, with the assistance of Vida Russell, 3 vols., EETS (Oxford: 2006) vol. 1, 86.

71 *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies by Johannes Mirkus* (*John Mirk*), ed. T. Erbe, 2 parts, EETS (London: 1905) part 1, 49.

72 *Chester Play* 9, lines 52–55.

73 *N-Town Play* 2, line 7.

74 *N-Town Play* 2, line 35.

75 *Le Mystère de la Résurrection: Angers* (*1456*)*: Edition Critique*, ed. P. Servet (Geneva: 1993) vol. 1, 318.

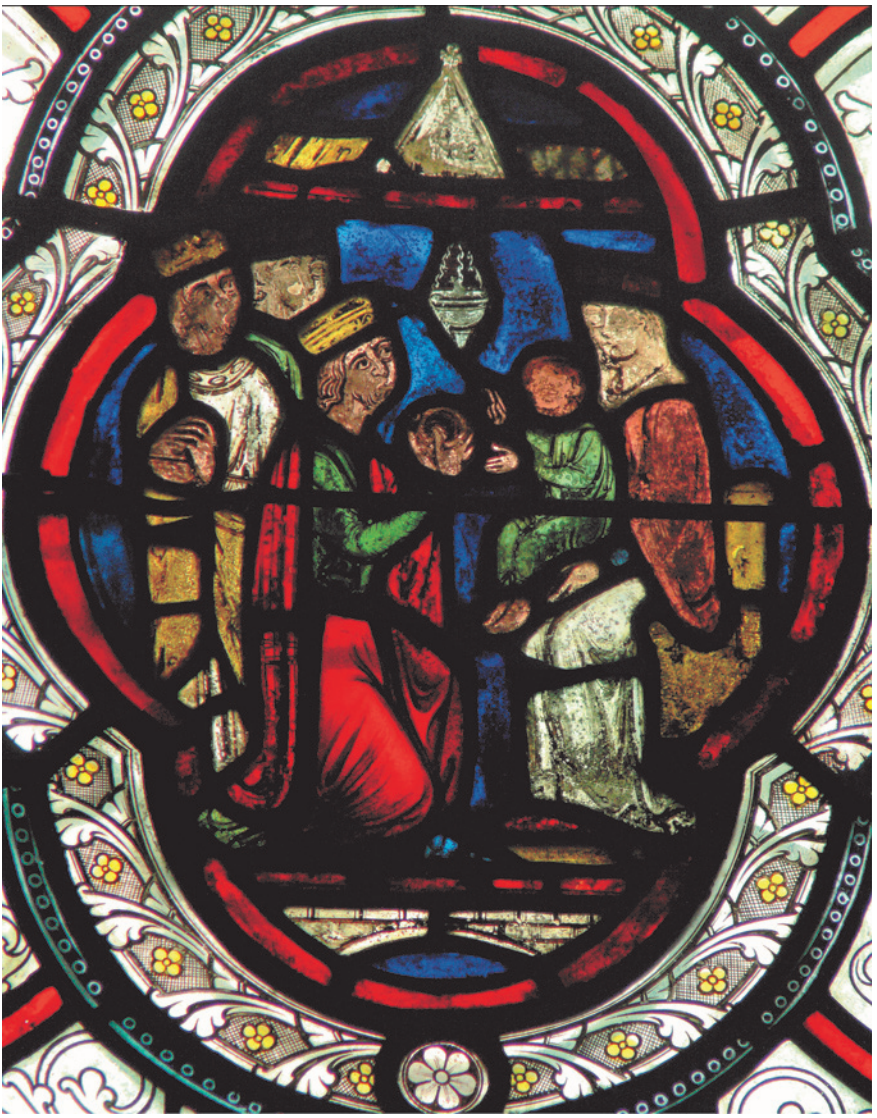

FIGURE 11.3 *Adoration of the Magi. St. Oswald, Ashbourne, Derbyshire, 13th century.* PHOTO © PAINTON COWEN FROM *ENGLISH STAINED GLASS*, THAMES & HUDSON LTD., LONDON.

York's English analogues also provide explicit evidence for the use of flowers on stage. In the N-Town Entry into Jerusalem, one of the citizens awaiting Jesus's arrival suggests that they should prepare a fragrant welcome for Christ:

> Late us than welcom hym with flowrys and brawnchis of the tre,
> For he wole take that to plesawns becawse of redolens.[76]

That this speaker's suggestion was taken up in performances of the play is demonstrated by the stage direction describing Christ's subsequent entry:

> *Here Cryst passyth forth. Ther metyth with hym a serteyn of chylderyn with flowrys and cast beforn hyme. And they synggyn "Gloria laus".*[77]

As Eamon Duffy has shown, these plays reflect the tradition of the Palm Sunday procession, where branches and flowers such as willow, box and yew were blessed and distributed, and where children sometimes strewed the procession path with flowers.[78] Churchwardens' accounts suggest that such cuttings were regularly used in parish churches around the country at the time of this feast. Entries for Palm Sunday 1517 at St Martin's Church in Outwich, London, mention payments for 'palme & box & bred, IV d.',[79] with 'palme' referring to the branches of trees substituting for the real palm fronds on the occasion of Palm Sunday, such as willow or yew (OED, 'palm' 3a).

Clearly, flowers strewn on stage were too far away to be smelled by most members of the audience; at York what feeble odour they might have produced would seem likely to have been drowned out by the noxious smells abounding in the town. It may even be that imitation flowers were used that were made of cloth or some other material, in which case they would have produced no smells at all: this appears to have been the case for at least a part of the décor described in the Angers stage direction mentioned above, which besides the freshly cut flowers also calls for branches charged with 'fruys de diverses especes comme cerises, prunes, almandes, orenges, grenades, poires, pommes, figues, raisins et telles choses artificielement faictes' [fruits of various kinds such as cherries, plumbs, almonds, oranges, pomegranates, pears, apples, figs, grapes and such things artificially made].[80] The best way of thinking about these stage flowers, and about their evocation in the words of the actors at York, may thus be to consider their function as olfactory stimulants:

76 *N-Town Play* 26, lines 448–449.

77 *N-Town Play* 26, sd. line 453.

78 Duffy E., *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400 – c. 1580* (New Haven etc.: 1993) 23–25.

79 Feasey H.J., *Ancient English Holy Week Ceremonial* (London: 1857) 57.

80 *Le Mystère de la Résurrection* vol. 1, 318.

neuroscientists today refer to the generation of mental images of odours with the terms 'odour imaging' or 'olfactory imagery'; apparently, familiar odours, like those created by flowers, are easier to imagine than others.[81] Perhaps in an infernally smelly town such as York, in which pleasant smells could only be dreamed of or remembered, the idea of sweet odours took on an enhanced spiritual meaning;[82] or perhaps, in the stinking streets of the town, allusion to the presence of patently absent sweet odours could have been exploited by the performers of the York pageants to humorous effect.

Since the liturgies of the Virgin that influenced late medieval drama were particularly rich in olfactory language, it is in the plays featuring the Virgin Mary that we most expect to find references to sweet scents. The liturgies for the feasts of the Nativity, the Assumption and the Purification of the Virgin applied verses from the Song of Solomon, with its profusion of sensuous imagery, to Mary.[83] She was identified, for example, with the woman 'that ste3eth vp bi desert, as a lytil 3erde of smoke of the swote spices, of myrre, and of encens, and of alle pymentarie poudre' (Song of Solomon, 3:6). An anonymous Middle English Marian lyric of the Assumption takes up the Virgin's sweet fragrance, praising '[t]he odour of hir mowthe aromatike',[84] and in a sermon on the nativity of the Virgin Mary, John Mirk likens Mary to a spicer's shop: 'Thus ys scho lyknet to a spycerys schoppe; for as a spycers schoppe smelleþe swete of dyuerse spices, soo scho for þe presens of þe Holy Gost þat was yn hur, and þe abundance of vertues þat scho smellyth swettyr þen any worldy spycery'.[85]

The feast of the Assumption of the Virgin held a particular olfactory appeal. The aromas of herbs, spices and flowers were used to signify Mary's victory over death that was celebrated in this feast. Periwinkle, verbena, thyme and other herbs and plants were laid on the altar, blessed and incensed.[86] A stage direction for the *Mystères des Actes des Apôtres* held at Bourges in April 1536

81 Djordjevic J. – Zatorre R.J. – Petrides M. – Jones-Gotman M., "The Mind's Nose: Effects of Odor and Visual Imagery on Odor Detection", *Psychological Science* 15, 3 (2004) 143–148.

82 Compare the discussion of the access to the divine afforded by the garlands of roses and lilies gifted to Valerian and Cecilia in Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" in Robertson E., "Apprehending the Divine and Choosing to Believe: Voluntarist Free Will in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*", *Chaucer Review* 46 (2011) 111–130.

83 Matter E.A., *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: 1990) 39; Gold P.S., *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago – London: 1985) 59.

84 "The Assumption and Mary as Queen of Heaven", in *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, ed. K. Saupe (Kalamazoo, MI: 1998) 112–117, 113, line 11.

85 *Mirk's Festial* 246.

86 Warner M., *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 2nd ed. (London, Weidenfeld – Nicolson: 1976; reprint, Oxford: 2013) 103.

provides evidence for the employment of perfumes at this particular moment in the theatrical representation of the career of Christ's mother. When the actor playing Jesus approached Mary's deathbed, accompanied by a host of angels, aroma was dispersed: 'A lheure que Jhs*crist* entre en la chambre de lad*ite* Vierge fault qu'il se face grant odeur de quelques senteurs'.[87] ['At the moment that Jesus Christ enters the chamber of the Blessed Virgin there must be made a strong scent of different perfumes.']

On the English medieval stage, the Virgin's sweet fragrance appears frequently to have been realized through the use of incense. The N-Town playtext and stage directions are explicit on this point. Incense is directly called for in the N-Town Assumption of Mary (Play 41). At the moment of the Virgin's Inhumation, Peter's words are followed by a stage direction:

> Now, holy brether, this body let us take,
> And wyth alle the worschepe we may ley it in the grave,
> Kyssyng it alle atonys for her sonys sake.
> Now, insence ye, and we schal put her in this cave.
>
> *Hic ponent corpus in sepulcrum, insensantes, et cantantes*.[88]

Other sweet smells would appear to be required in the N-Town Mary plays, where the actor playing the Virgin draws attention to the sweet smelling manna on which Mary feeds during her stay at the temple prior to her marriage:

> I shal fede me of this fode my Lord hath me sent.
> All maner of savowrys in this mete I fynde!
> I felt nevyr non so swete ner so redolent.[89]

However, incense was used not only in plays which appear to have been written for indoor performance, as is the case with the N-Town Mary Plays, but also in plays known to have been performed outside. When in the Chester Nativity Play Sybbell tells Octavian of Christ's birth, Octavian signals his wonder and a change in attitude towards his own rule by censing the stage:

> OCTAVIAN: A, Sibbell, this is a wondrouse sight,
> for yonder I see a mayden bright,

87 *Mystère des Actes des Apôtres, représenté à Bourges en avril 1536*, ed. Baron Auguste de Girardot (Paris, J. Claye: 1854) 13.

88 *N-Town Play* 41, lines 449–452 and sd.

89 *N-Town Play* 9, lines 255–257.

> a yonge chylde in her armes clight,
> a bright crosse in his head.
> Honour I wyll that sweete wight
> with incense throughowt all my might,
> for that reverence is most right,
> if that yt bee thy reade.
>
> Incense bringe, I command, in hye
> to honour this child, kinge of mercye.
> Should I bee God? Naye, naye, witterlye!
> Great wronge iyws yt were.
> For this childe is more worthye
> then such a thowsande as am I.
> Therefore to God moste mightye
> incense I offer here.[90]

On the effects produced by the use of incense at these moments, Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter have written of a blurring of biblical time that might perhaps be compared with the passing of the pageant wagons in York at the feast of Corpus Christi: 'incense,' they write,

> coaxed a series of complex associations as it billowed up from the thurible [...]. It might have reminded parishioners of the incense brought from the East by the Magi, and possibly of the angel in Revelation (Rev. 8:3–8) who, through incense, wrought thunder, lightning, and earthquakes.[91]

Dugan notes a more worldly connection: 'Produced from spices originating in the Holy Land and native botanicals,' she writes, 'medieval religious scents represented a myriad of geographic, political, and economic networks. The exotic, the profane, and holy all were invoked by scented incense and balm'.[92] Incense, then, was frequently used in the late medieval drama, and its appeal would appear to have resided in its capacity to heighten moments of devotional intensity and to blur otherwise fixed temporal and geographical boundaries by virtue of its mesmerizing smell.

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90 *Chester Play* 6, lines 651–666.

91 Heffernan T.J. – Matter E.A., "Introduction to the Liturgy of the Medieval Church", in Heffernan T.J. – Matter E.A. (eds.), *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: 2005) 1–10, 6.

92 Dugan H., "Scent of a Woman: Performing the Politics of Smell in Late Medieval and Early Modern England", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38 (2008) 229–252, 234.

The foregoing citations help to contextualize the theatrical potential of the references to herbs, spices, flowers and incense that are scattered throughout the York play-text.

1) In the York Prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge (Play 4), God draws the attention of Adam and Eve to the herbs and spices growing in the Garden of Paradise:

> Adam and Eve, this is the place
> That I have graunte you of my grace
> To have your wonnyng in.
> Erbes, spyce, frute on tree,
> Beastes, fewles, all that ye see
> Shall bowe to you, more and myn.[93]

2) The gift of incense is referred to in the York Play of Herod Questioning the Three Kings and the Offering of the Magi (Play 16). Here it is equated with the power of judgement.

> And sythyn thow shall sitte to be demand,
> To helle or to heven for to have us,
> Insens to thi servis is semand.
> Sone, se to thi suggettis and save us.[94]

3) In the Entry into Jerusalem (Play 25), we find a citizen of the town making a suggestion similar to that found in the N-Town play-text, accompanied by a reference to a crowd of singing children (in the N-Town text, as we saw, it is the singing children who are instructed to strew flowers before Christ's entry):

> Go we than with processioun
> To mete that comely [gracious one] as us awe [ought]
> With braunches, floures, and unysoune [= singing],
> With myghtfull songes her [here] on a rawe.
> Our childir schall
> Go synge before that men may knawe.[95]

93 *York Play* 4, lines 1–6.

94 *York Play* 16, lines 329–32.

95 *York Play* 25, lines 260–265.

In the same play, Christ is greeted by one of the Jerusalem citizens as a sweet smelling flower:

> Hayll, florisshand floure that nevere shall fade,
> Hayll, vyolett vernand [blooming] with swete odoure [...].[96]

While a specific stage direction of the kind cited from the N-Town Entry into Jerusalem is missing here, the report of the Entry delivered by Bedellus in the York play of the First Trial by Pilate (Play 30) indicates the likelihood that flowers were strewn on or from the pageant wagon at this moment:

> Als a God in that grounde thai hym grette [greeted],
> Wele semand hym in waye with worschippe lele.
> *Osanna* thei sange, 'the sone of David,'
> Riche men with thare robes, thei ranne to his fete,
> And poure folke fecched floures of the frith [forest]
> And made myrthe and melody this man for to mete.[97]

4) The York play-text includes several references to the sweet smell associated with the Virgin. In the Purification of the Virgin (Play 17), Symeon praises Mary in terms that underline her sweet fragrance:

> Haill floscampy [flower of the field] and flower vyrgynall,
> The odour of thy goodnes reflars [rises up] to us all;
> Haill, moost happy to great and to small
> For our weyll [prosperity].
> Haill ryall roose, moost ruddy of hewe,
> Haill flour unfadyng, both freshe ay and newe,
> Haill the kyndest in comforth that ever man knewe
> For grete heyll [health].[98]

In the Assumption of the Virgin (Play 45), various angels call out to Mary to rise to their ranks, calling her by the names of flowers and emphasising the sweet fragrance associated with her:

96 *York Play* 25, lines 496–497.
97 *York Play* 30, lines 341–346.
98 *York Play* 17, lines 366–373.

II Angelus: Rise, lilly ful lusty, thi luffe is full likand.
IV Angelus: Rise, rose ripe redolent, in reste to be reynand.[99]

Finally, we might register that it is the spicers who produced the play of the Annunciation to Mary and the Visitation at York (Play 12). In her study of food in medieval drama, Ann Rycraft maintains that the allocation to the spicers of this play cannot be considered appropriate to the guild concerned.[100] But it should now be clear that this guild was especially well placed to provide the props required to bring forth the rich aromatic scent associated with Mary and thus to realize the commonplace assertions of the Virgin's sweet fragrance.

Conclusion

Several of the references to the senses listed above appear to be largely conventional, such as the comparison of the Virgin to roses and lilies. But our catalogue of olfactory moments in the English cycle plays suggests that these references to olfaction were also apt to be elaborated upon in performance. At York, as elsewhere, these were commonplaces that were suggestive of sensory experiences, perhaps acting as olfactory triggers, prompting a memory of a particular smell; they might on occasion have been made real. In the absence of the unusually detailed stage directions given in manuscripts such as the N-Town book, we contend that particularly close attention must be paid to what can be gleaned regarding the horizon of audience expectations. Certainly, the contextualizing evidence we have advanced does not allow us to make any positivist claims about the performance history of the York Play. By concentrating on York's affinities with contemporary ideas about sense perception and with analogous visual and dramatic productions, we hope, however, that we have been able to go some way towards clarifying the manner in which the Play's gestures towards smell might have engaged its participants.

Recent scholarship in theatre studies has turned to phenomenology in an attempt to explore the audience's corporeal and sensual experience of performance. An approach which acknowledges what Simon Shepherd has called the effects 'felt in the body' but 'bypassing the intellect' seems to be particularly

99 *York Play* 45, lines 106 and 108.

100 Rycraft A., "Food in Medieval Drama", in Walker H. (ed.), *Food in the Arts: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1998* (Blackawton: 1999) 164–172, 165.

productive for the study of medieval theatre if we consider it in the context of affective piety.[101] Affective piety depended on the emotional and sensual response to biblical events, on compassion that enabled the devotee to participate in the holy narrative and to relive its joys and pains in emotional and physical terms. Medieval theatre as a multi-sensory medium was particularly well suited to generate such a response. Watching the biblical events unfold on stage, listening to heavenly music, and – not least – smelling the sweet fragrance of the Virgin Mary offered the sensual and physical encounter with the sacred which many devotees yearned for. Olfactory elements would have helped to suspend the temporal and spatial barrier between the audience and the staged gospel events. 'Smell,' as Barbara Baert has recently argued, 'bridges different times and realities'.[102]

Devotional practice which involved the feeding and stimulation of the senses was, as we have seen, railed against by the author of the *Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. The anxieties voiced in this text were amplified during the Reformation, but attempts to restrict olfactory access to the divine apparently met with resistance. In 1544, the traditionalist Bishop of Winchester, Stephen Gardiner, complained that the reformers of the Church cared only to access worshippers through their ears, through oral preaching, neglecting to appeal to their other senses: 'they speak so myche of prechynge, so as all the gates of our sences and wayes to mannis understandynge shuld be shit up, savyng the eare alone' –[103] a reaction which, one might imagine, was shared by some of the citizens of York after the banning of their play in the mid-sixteenth century. It is emblematic of the ephemeral nature of smell and the difficulties facing scholars interested in the history of its uses that a piece of evidence adumbrating the past fragrance of medieval worship such as this registers not the presence of an olfactory element but its past presence: its absence.

101 Shepherd S., *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (Abingdon: 2006) 36–37.

102 Baert B., "'An Odour. A Taste. A Touch. Impossible to Describe': *Noli Me Tangere* and the Senses", in Boer W. de – Göttler C. (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 111–151, 140.

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